

Honey, My Wagon's Hitched to Yours by lilypond3

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Summary:

Nancy spends Thanksgiving at the Byers house.

Honey, My Wagon's Hitched to Yours

Author's Note:

This story popped into my head while I was eating Thanksgiving dinner with my family a while back, and I simply couldn't help myself.

With the exception of the warning bell, the halls are quiet. Almost everyone has already made their way to class, and the few stragglers left behind are quickening their pace. My stride quickens, too, but not because I'm going to be late; this is my (or should I say, our) study period, and there's nowhere I need to be when the final bell rings. I'm just moving faster because there's somewhere I want to be.

When I get to the darkroom, he's already bent over a tray, delicately tilting it so the chemical bath washes over the print. He doesn't look up, but the barely-there smile is indicator enough that he heard me come in.

"Hey," Jonathan says, eyes still on the tray.

"Hey." I drop my bag by the door and move to his side, peeking over his shoulder at the picture slowly blossoming on the paper. I've made him explain the whole process of developing to me at least three times (partially out of curiosity, but mostly just to see that look he gets when he talks about something he loves), and by now I can understand that he's agitating the print in the developer, and next he'll move it to the stop bath. I've even gone as far as to check out a book on photography and developing from the library to fill in the chemistry-related gaps in his knowledge, which made him smile one of those smiles that makes me wish I were the one with the camera.

Ever since the gate was closed, I've spent most of my study periods and the occasional lunch period in the darkroom, watching Jonathan work and making light conversation. I spend a lot of my time with him in general, now, but he doesn't seem to mind. He started picking me up before school every morning after he came back from staying home with Will, and we eat lunch together in his car almost every day. Sometimes when he's not working, he'll take me to his house

after school, and we do homework and talk while Will draws at the dining room table. It's all been very innocent, though I was bold enough to hold his hand last Friday night when we went to see that Terminator movie and kiss his cheek when he took me home.

It's been two weeks and four days since we slept together at Murray's, and we've been tip-toeing around it ever since. Every time I think we're about to broach the topic, something (usually one of us panicking and changing the conversation) interrupts us and we revert back to this sort of friends, sort of more dynamic. I don't know why I'm so afraid to just put it all out there, to just tell him that I lie awake at night remembering how his hands gripped my waist, feeling the ghost of his lips on my neck, and wishing more than anything that he was lying next to me and holding me the way he did that night. Even now, just standing so close to him makes my whole body feel electrified and on edge, and I have to stop myself from reaching out and brushing the hair out of his eyes.

Instead, I focus back on the developing photo. I think it might be the one he took of me last week when we were doing homework in his living room. I was lying on his couch with my feet in his lap, buried in my physics textbook when I heard the shutter go off. I remember looking up to see Jonathan fiddling with his camera, looking almost embarrassed with a blush creeping up his neck. His eyes flicked to mine and away again, but I only smiled and bent back into my book.

"What was I saying there?" I ask, only a little sarcasm tinting my words.

"You just looked so..." He struggles to find the right words, seeming to test them in his head carefully before landing on the ones he wants. "Normal. Like the biggest problem in your life was trying to figure out Kepler's laws instead of fighting a monster from another dimension. It felt like, for the first time since last November, we could finally just be regular high school teenagers. I wanted to remember that."

"It does feel like we got some closure, doesn't it?" I muse, watching as he moves the photo into the stop bath. I think about Mr. and Mrs. Holland, about the looks on their faces as they buried a silicon and cotton clone of their daughter's body. My own guilt was only

magnified, but it was a relief to help them put Barb to rest. "I mean, nothing will ever feel normal again, but I'm getting used to living without so much weight on my shoulders, if that makes sense."

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah, that makes sense."

It's silent between us for a few moments, but the conversation picks up when he moves on to the next print. I ask about Will and his mom (both doing better), he asks about Mike and Eleven (separated once again and hating it), and we just pass the time comfortably in each other's company.

"So what are your family's plans for tomorrow?" he asks, moving a print to the fixator.

"Um, I don't know. Why?" Usually he just asks about me and my non-existent plans, not my whole family's.

"It's Thanksgiving," he says, giving her a mildly confused look out of the corner of his eye.

"Oh, right," I say, suddenly remembering the holiday. "I totally forgot."

"Doesn't your family have dinner or something?" His eyes are back on the tray. He's working on a picture of his mom and Will at the kitchen table, heads bent together over Will's homework.

"Usually, but not this year," I explain. "My mom's sister had an emergency with her husband down in Tampa, so she took Holly there for the week to help her out, and Mike convinced Hopper to let him spend the day with him and Eleven at the cabin. I would say it's just me and my dad, but he's just going to watch football in the living room all day, so really it's just me and my textbooks this year." I try to smile and laugh it off so I don't sound so pathetic and lonely, but I know my face is not convincing. It's not like Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday, but the idea of spending it with my homework instead of my family is just depressing.

"You should come to my house," Jonathan blurts out, seeming to surprise even himself as he backpedals. "I mean, if you want to. It

was just gonna be the three of us, anyway, and I know my mom would love to have you join us and I-" He cuts himself off, his already red-tinted cheeks going even darker in the light of the darkroom.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" I ask. "It's a family holiday, I don't want to intrude..."

"You could never intrude," he says quickly. He looks nervous and embarrassed, a little frightened, even, like a deer in headlights. "I mean, my family loves you. They'd be happy if you came."

"Would you?" I ask because I can't help myself. "Be happy, I mean."

"Yeah," he smiles just a little as he replies. "Of course."

"Okay," I say, fighting off a blush of my own. "Then yeah. That sounds perfect, actually. Thank you."

I'm rewarded with one of Jonathan's rare wide smiles that shows off his slightly crooked canine. "Anytime."

I really want to kiss him right now, and I have almost plucked up the courage when the bell shatters the moment. I sink back on my heels, dejected. "I have to go," I say. "Brundy locks the door if you're late."

"I have to hang these up, but I'll see you after school?" He's already pinning up the prints he made before, but the one of his mom and Will is still in the water rinse.

"Yeah, I'll meet you in the parking lot." I pick up my bag at the door but turn back before I open it. "Hey, Jonathan?"

"Yeah, Nance?"

"I love your family, too." It's true; Will and Joyce have wormed their way into my heart and planted roots there, and Jonathan...

I know he's looking at me, I can feel the intensity of his gaze on my face, but I don't wait for him to respond. I slip out the door and into the hall, hoping the redness of my face will be blamed on my rushed pace.

Only now as I'm pulling up to the Byers' house do I regret accepting Jonathan's invitation. Doubt floods my mind. What was I thinking? This is their first holiday as a whole, healthy family since Will went missing last year, and I'm crashing it. They're all way too polite to say anything, but my presence is totally inappropriate. Maybe I should just go home and pretend to be sick, save everyone from the uncomfortable evening.

A movement in the window catches my eye. It's Will, squinting through the glare of my headlights before smirking and calling out something to the rest of his family. Shit. Well, there's no turning back now that I've been spotted. I kill the engine, pausing for a moment to breathe before forcing the door of my mom's car open. I grab the pie Jonathan told me I didn't have to bring off the passenger's seat and step out into the bitter fall air.

The door swings open before I get the chance to knock.

"Nancy!" Joyce exclaims, pulling me into a hug. "It's nice to see you, sweetheart. I'm so glad you could join us."

I wrap my arm that isn't holding the pie lightly around her, the affection taking me by surprise. Joyce is always kind to me when I'm around (which is pretty much all the time these days), but I haven't seen her this chipper since she lost Bob. "It's nice to see you, too, Mrs. Byers," I say as she releases me. "Thank you so much for having me. I, uh, brought you a pie." I awkwardly present the dish to her as she ushers me through the door.

The house is warm and...happy. The darkness that had hung over this family for the last year is completely gone, replaced by a glow of contented, organized chaos and love. The contrast to my own home, filled with big pockets of emptiness and insincerity, is almost overwhelming.

"Oh, how lucky!" Joyce says as she accepts the pie. "The supermarket was all out of the Sara Lee yesterday. Will, come take this to the kitchen, and see if your brother needs any help while you're in there. I can take your coat, dear."

Will, who was watching us from the living room, gives me the same shy smile I often see on Jonathan as he takes the pie from his mom and I hand her my coat. "Hi, Nancy," he says as I return the smile. He looks down at the pie, smile broadening when he recognizes it. "Is this your mom's cherry pie?"

"It's her recipe, but I made it," I say, glad that he remembered. I made it mostly for him after I recalled how much he liked it when he stayed over for dinner last week. "So don't get too excited."

He laughs lightly, walking towards the kitchen. He turns around when he's halfway there and raises his eyebrows expectantly at me. "You coming?"

"Oh," I say, glancing at Joyce before following him. "Yeah, sure."

Will smirks at his mom before leading me to the kitchen. I can just barely see the warning look Joyce shoots her son before we've turned the corner and are out of sight.

The kitchen smells incredible, a medley of flavors that I couldn't name individually but know that their sum is something delicious. Jonathan is standing at the counter facing away from us, the muscles in his back tensing as he mixes whatever is in the bowl in front of him. Suddenly, my mouth is watering for a completely different reason.

"Hey, Jonathan," Will calls out, his voice almost imperceptibly teasing. "Guess who's here!"

Jonathan looks back over his shoulder, his arms stuttering slightly in their mixing when his eyes meet mine. "Nancy," he says, turning and giving me an echo of Will's smile from earlier. "I heard you come in. I was just about to come out and-"

The oven timer's insistent ringing cuts him off. He smiles apologetically before opening the oven, sticking his hand inside for a moment, and taking it out. He resets the timer and turns back to Will and me. "Where'd the pie come from?" he asks, even though he already knows the answer.

"Nancy made it," Will says, placing it gently on the counter. "You should invite her to dinner more often."

"So you can exploit her for dessert?" Jonathan asks, smirking at his brother.

"Among other reasons," Will says with a grin as he turns and walks back towards the dining room, leaving us alone in the kitchen.

"You came," Jonathan finally says after a beat of silence. We're standing on opposite sides of the room, and the slight, ever-present tension that's existed between us for over a year settles in the empty space.

"You invited me," I remind him teasingly.

"Yeah, I just-" His brow furrows as he stumbles over his words. "I mean, I'm happy you came."

The sincerity in his voice makes my chest uncomfortably warm, and I try to hide my smile as I glance around at the various dishes in progress. "I didn't know you could cook," I say, trying to distract myself.

"Oh, this is mostly my mom," he says sheepishly, gesturing to the food. "I'm just helping her out, really."

"Well, what can I do?" I ask, moving closer to the action so I can find a way to assist.

"No, you're the guest," he says, going back the bowl he was working at before. "Your job is to eat the food. You don't have to help."

"I know," I say, peeking over his shoulder. I watch for a moment as he works out the lumps in the bowl of mashed potatoes, and it almost feels like we're back in the darkroom. "But I really want to, so give me a job, chef."

He laughs softly. "There's no point in arguing, is there?"

"Nope," I say, grinning triumphantly.

"Alright, fine," he sighs overdramatically, barely concealing a grin of his own. "Have it your way. You can finish mashing these."

I take his place at the bowl while he moves to the stove top, taking the lid off a pan and moving the contents around with a spatula. The look on his face reminds me of the look he gets when he develops, all quiet focus and precision. I drop my eyes to the bowl before he can catch me staring.

"Your mom and Will seem a lot better," I say to fill the silence.

"Yeah, my mom puts on a brave face," he says in a low voice so the won't hear him in the other room, "but I think she just doesn't want us to see her hurting. And Will... it's like nothing ever happened. He's almost too good, you know? I just keep waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"Hey," I say softly, waiting for him to look at me. "It's over. Will's safe. Nothing like that is ever going to happen to him again. We won't let it."

He looks at me for a moment with an unreadable expression, his gaze cutting right through me, before nodding slowly.

"It's like you said," I continue, trying really hard to keep the bitter sarcasm out of my voice. "We can all be regular kids again. Live a normal life."

"Whatever that is," he almost whispers. Another tense silence falls over the kitchen. I consider bringing up Murray's just to get away from this depressing topic.

Joyce saves me instead.

"How are things looking in here?" she says as she approaches from the dining room.

Jonathan instantly adopts a small smile when she enters. "Everything's great, Mom," he says, adding some salt and pepper to his pan. I guess Joyce isn't the only one who puts on a brave face. "It'll be ready in a few minutes."

"Oh, Nancy," Joyce says, spotting me with the bowl. "You're sweet to help, but you don't have to."

"Don't bother," Jonathan chuckles. "I already lost that fight."

"It's alright, Mrs. Byers," I say reassuringly. "I insist."

"Well, okay," she says slowly. I can tell the hostess in her wants to fight me on it, but she relents. "I'll leave you to it, then. Will and I will set the table, you just let me know when everything's ready."

Jonathan hums in agreement as she goes back into the dining room, calling for Will to come help her with the silverware. We return to our tasks and let the cloud of tension roll back over us. I suddenly remember the conversation I had with Mike this morning when I told him about my plans to spend Thanksgiving here.

"Poor Will," he says, laughing as he grabs an apple from the fridge.

"What do you mean, 'poor Will'?" I pause in the middle of rolling out the pie crust to glare at Mike, but he's giving me a shit-eating grin.

"He has to sit in all that tension and pretend not to notice you and Jonathan panting after each other," he says, taking a bite of his apple. "It's disgusting."

"We do not pant!" I hiss at him, my face getting hot.

"Oh, give it up, Nance," he says, rolling his eyes. "It's so obvious that you like each other. When are you two gonna suck it up and make out, already?"

"Ugh," I groan, burying my face in my hands in an effort to conceal my blush. "That is such a weird thing for my little brother to say to me."

"Hey, somebody had to say it." I can hear his footsteps leaving the kitchen, but then he stops. "You're getting flour all over your forehead, by the way."

"Nancy, is everything alright?"

Jonathan's voice snaps me out of the memory, and I realize I've been

staring at him. His brows are furrowed in concern as he searches my face, and I quickly drop my eyes as my cheeks burn. "Yeah, I'm fine," I say, busying my hands with the already-finished potatoes. "Just got lost in my head for a minute."

"Oh," he says, unconvinced. I told him about my nightmares when we were lying in bed together at Murray's (great pillow talk, I know), so now he thinks I'm imagining monsters and shadows every time I zone out. It's been a decent out whenever I accidentally fantasize about him when we're together. "What's on your mind?"

"Just thinking about something Mike said," I say, knowing he'd see through me if I tried to lie.

"What'd he say?" he asks, turning off the gas on the stove.

I'm literally saved by the bell as the oven timer goes off, the sudden ringing making Jonathan jump before reaching into the oven again. He puts on the oven mitts lying on the counter next to him and pulls the turkey out of the oven, setting it down on the kitchen table.

"Should we tell your mom that everything's ready?" I ask.

"Yeah, we can," he says, looking at me hesitantly. "But do you want to talk about what happened with Mike?"

"Maybe later," I say, and I mean it. Mike was right; Jonathan and I will have to face the music one day and finally put everything out in the open, but right before we sit down to Thanksgiving dinner with his family does not feel like the right time to do that. So instead I give him a reassuring smile. "You have a dinner to serve."

By the time Joyce is slicing the pie I brought, I've completely forgotten why I was so nervous to come. The Byers kept up a light and playful banter all throughout the meal, making sure to include me in the conversations and make me comfortable. Every exchange felt so natural, so easy, and I could feel myself slotting comfortably into the family's dynamic as the time went by. For a terrifying and self-indulgent moment, I imagined what it would be like to share

every holiday with Jonathan and his family. I had to cut that thought short before a blush could give me away.

Now Joyce is passing around slices of cherry pie, and a piece of me deflates. The night is coming to a close, and soon I'll have to return to my mostly-empty house and face the loneliness that waits for me there. I feel silly for envying Jonathan's life because I've had it so easy with my big house, loose budget, and (mostly) decent reputation, but here I am, wishing my parents looked at me and Mike with a fraction of the love and pride that Joyce has in her eyes when she looks at her boys, wishing I was as close with Mike as Jonathan is with Will (though that's something I can fix, I remind myself), and wishing I could spend every day living in a house that emanates love the way Jonathan's does. I wonder if Jonathan has ever wished he could have a life of stability, comfort, and ease like mine instead of what he has. I hope he hasn't.

A loud knock on the front door interrupts Will's animated recount of the boys' latest campaign, and all four of our heads swivel towards the sound.

"Who's that?" Will asks.

"Maybe it's Jim and the kids," Joyce says, but she doesn't seem convinced by her proposition. She's already standing up from the table and moving towards the door. "I invited them over for dinner, but maybe they decided to just stop by for dessert."

"Sounds like Hopp," Jonathan attempts to tease, but the strain in his voice and his forced smirk keep the joke from landing. His body has become tight and rigid, and his hand seems to have unconsciously clenched tighter around his knife. Will looks nervous as well but continues to eat his pie. I suppose after everything they've been through, it makes sense that an unexpected knock on the door would put this family on such high alert.

I don't realize I'm holding my breath as Joyce opens the door. "What are you doing here?" I hear her say. The view of the door is obscured from the dining room, but I can tell by the surprise and apprehension in Joyce's voice that whoever is behind the door is not a desired house guest.

If I thought Jonathan was tense before, the way his entire body seizes when a male voice replies, "What, I can't see my family on Thanksgiving?" is like a whole new level of stress I've only seen on him when lives were at stake. His expression darkens into anger and resentment as he glares in the direction of the door, and I know who's here before Joyce says his name.

"Lonnie, I don't think it's the best idea-"

"They're my kids, too, Joyce," he says, his voice a strange mixture of desperation and annoyance. "It's been almost eight months. You can't keep them away from me like this."

"I don't," Joyce responds, fire creeping into her voice. "You're the one that only shows up when you want something from us."

"I don't have time for this," he grumbles, stomping past Joyce and into the house. I stare at the wall next to Jonathan's head, knowing I should probably leave but feeling frozen in my seat. I used to see Lonnie Byers around town before he abandoned his family for a girlfriend and a one-bedroom in Indianapolis, but I've never actually met him. After everything Jonathan's told me about him, I hoped I never would.

Jonathan stands up from his seat, his hands balled into fists by his side. The focused hatred in his eyes tells me that Lonnie is in the room.

"What are you doing here, Lonnie?" Jonathan says, his voice sounding more poisonous than I've ever heard before.

"That's no way to greet your father," Lonnie says from somewhere behind me. He sounds more amused than angry. "Hey there, kiddo."

Lonnie moves into my peripheral to stand next to Will, clapping his hand on the boy's shoulder. Will sits utterly still, but I can tell from the look on his face that he's conflicted. He looks like he can't decide whether to shrink away from his father or lean into his touch. "Hey, dad," he says hesitantly, the words barely above a whisper.

I finally allow myself to look at the unwelcome guest, and he looks

just as I remember him: messy salt-and-pepper hair, scruffy beard, and dark creases under his eyes. I can't help but notice that Jonathan got more features from him than he did from Joyce, like the angle of his jaw and the shape of his eyes. I try to look for the features that are nothing like Jonathan instead.

As I study him, Lonnie's eyes finally fall on me. "And who's this?" he says, a playful glint flashing in his eyes. His gaze flickers to Jonathan before returning to me. "Your girlfriend?" He scoffs slightly like he's laughing at his own joke, and the part of me that would have been embarrassed burns with anger and annoyance.

Before Jonathan can get a response past his gritted teeth, I stand and hold my hand out to Lonnie. "I'm Nancy," I say, my voice sounding tight and on edge. I can't force myself to smile politely like my mother has trained me to do when meeting someone for the first time, but I try to keep the disgust and hatred off my face. I've never disliked a stranger more in my entire life.

His hand feels rough and calloused when he grips mine, a worker's hand. Nothing like Jonathan's long, slender fingers designed for delicate artistry. "Nancy...the Wheeler's kid?" Lonnie says, his eyebrows furrowed in vague recognition. He shakes his head. "I don't get it."

"I'm sorry?" I say, but a nauseated feeling replaces my confusion when his eyes scan my body before returning to my face.

"Why are you here?"

"Lonnie, don't be rude," says Joyce from behind me. I turn my head to see her standing with her arms crossed by the left side of the doorway, and I can tell she's trying to hide her anger and keep her cool. "She's our guest. And she was invited." She puts a particularly strong emphasis on the word *'invited.'*

"No, I'm not trying to be rude," Lonnie says, still staring at me. "I'm just confused. Why do you *want* to be here? What are you getting out of it?"

I'm so confused by his questions that it takes me a moment to

respond. "I don't think I understand," I say slowly, looking to Jonathan for help. He looks like he's bracing himself for a familiar punchline he's been expecting all along. "I'm a friend of Jonathan's if that's what you mean."

Lonnie chuckles. "Jon doesn't have friends," he says. It doesn't sound like he's trying to be cruel, but it still pisses me off. Especially since I can't really negate it. "And there's no way in hell he can pull a girl like you."

"*Lonnie!*" Joyce interjects, her face twisting into an expression of angry surprise. I feel my own face mirror hers as my teeth grind together to keep my unkind thoughts behind my lips

"What?" he says holding his hands up as he turns to his ex-wife. "Am I wrong?"

"Yes," I all but growl without thinking, biting my tongue to stop myself from tacking on '*you asshole*' at the end. The room goes silent for a moment, my face heating up as the implications of my brief response finally register in my mind. *Yes, you're wrong. Yes, Jonathan can pull a girl like me. Yes, he already has.*

The wide-eyed look on Lonnie's face slowly morphs into a smirk. He turns his eyes away from me to look at Jonathan, but I can't bring myself to do the same. "She's a little spitfire, isn't she?"

"Get out, Lonnie," Jonathan says, his voice low and dark.

"Hey, this is my house," Lonnie says, his face going from playful to dangerous in an instant. "I can be here whenever I damn well please."

"Not anymore, it isn't," Joyce spits. "You signed it over to me in the divorce. Now get the hell out of my house before I call the police and have you arrested for trespassing and harassment."

Lonnie sneers, looking down at Will expectantly. Will immediately shifts his eyes to his lap, and I can tell that he's about to cry. My heart breaks as I fight the urge to shove Lonnie out the door and comfort the poor boy. God dammit, he's been through enough without this shit. I can't help but glance at Jonathan, who's moved to

Will's side and placed a protective hand on his shoulder. He's face to face with his father, but he doesn't flinch or waver when Lonnie growls, "You know, I'm entitled to a lot more than I ask from you. It wouldn't be hard to get a court to see things my way."

"So you want my money?" Joyce laughs bitterly. "You aren't entitled to shit, Lonnie. Take me to court, and I'll prove it to you."

The anger on his face is boiling over into rage. He turns from Jonathan and advances toward Joyce, and without thinking, I step into his path. He is mere inches away from me, towering over my head and glaring down with barely restrained fury in his eyes. My heart is about to beat out of my chest, and I curl my shaking hands into fists before crossing them over my chest. I try to school my features into an expression as dangerous as his as I tell myself over and over again *you fought a Demogorgan, you fought a Demogorgan*.

"Don't touch her," I say, my voice so low I wonder if he can even hear me. "Don't make this worse. Just leave."

Lonnie glowers at me for another moment before storming out of the house, hitting me with his shoulder on the way out.

The house is silent for an endless beat of time as we all digest what just happened. Jonathan and Will are staring at me with wide eyes and utter shock painted all over their faces. I feel frozen again, but I'm not sure what I would do if I could move, anyway. My eyes find Jonathan's of their own accord, and I can't untangle the emotions there enough to distinguish them individually.

It's Will who ends up breaking the silence. "Holy *shit*, Nancy."

"William, language!" Joyce admonishes, apparently out of habit.

Maybe it's Will reaction after just having been on the verge of tears, or maybe it's Joyce's classic mom response, but I can't stop myself from laughing. Will laughs with me, and even Jonathan huffs an unsure chuckle as he stares incredulously at me.

"Nancy, sweetheart, are you okay?" Joyce says, stepping between me and the boys and putting both her hands on my shoulders as she

inspects my face for signs of distress.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I say, the giggles finally stopping. The tension that had overwhelmed me just moments ago is completely gone from my body as I turn my attention to Joyce. "Are you okay?" I ask with concern. I can only imagine what it's like to have a man like that tied to your life in such a permanent way, and yet again, my heart aches for the Byers.

"Oh, don't worry about me," she says, brushing a bit of hair off my face the way I've seen her do to Will and Jonathan. Her eyes look misty, more so than usual. "I'm so sorry you got dragged into our mess, Nancy. I wish you hadn't had to see that."

"It's alright, Ms. Byers," I say, pulling her into a hug without thinking. My eyes meet Jonathan's again over his mother's shoulder. "Your mess is mine."

Joyce wraps her arms tightly around me, laughing. Jonathan just stares back at me, looking awestruck and unsure.

She releases me, taking a step back as she wipes quickly at her eyes. "Jonathan, why don't you walk Nancy back to her car while Will and I start cleaning things up here?"

I can't help but frown a little. "Are you sure you don't need any help?" I ask, trying to prolong my visit any way I can. I realize it's strange for me to want to stay after what just happened at the same time that I realize that I don't care how strange my attachment to this family is. "I'd be more than happy to pitch in."

Joyce just laughs. "You've done more than your fair share tonight," she jokes. "You can be excused from clean-up."

"Alright," I sigh, trying not to look disappointed. "Well, thank you so much for letting me spend the holiday with your family. I had a lovely time."

"You're always welcome, dear," Joyce said, rubbing my arm affectionately. "We love having you."

I smile brightly at Joyce, a woman who has had so much pain and

loss in her life but somehow manages to still love with her entire heart.

"Will, take Nancy to get her coat from the hall closet, please," Joyce says, turning around to look at her youngest son. "I need Jonathan's help in the kitchen for a second."

"Okay, Mom," Will says as he jumps from his seat. I don't have time to catch Jonathan's eye as Will ushers me out of the dining room and into the hallway.

Will leads me to a door about halfway down the hallway before stopping to swing it open. There are only a handful of jackets hung up in the closet, and Will easily picks mine out before handing it to me. He squints at me as I slide the material over my arms.

"What?" I ask.

"You're a badass, kind of," he says.

"Thanks, kind of," I say, smiling at him.

"Are you and Jonathan dating?"

I stop short, my arm halfway through a sleeve as I look at Will. "That came out of nowhere," I say, avoiding a real answer.

Will just shrugs, trying to hide his smirk as he shuts the door and walks back toward the living room. I'm left staring after him for a moment before I follow. I wonder if Will thinks I pant over his brother like Mike does. I wonder if he told Jonathan. God, help me.

Jonathan's waiting for me at the front door with his hands in his pockets. He looks awkward and uncomfortable, a fading red tint in his cheeks as he meets my eyes. "You ready?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say, succumbing to the tension. I tug on my sleeves just so I have something to do with my hands and call goodbye to Joyce and Will over my shoulder.

He opens the door for me and follows at my side as I walk slowly across his porch. I want to say something, I'm just not sure what. I

wish I'd parked further away.

"So. Trust issues," I decide on, not looking at him. "I get it."

He doesn't respond right away, but I can feel his gaze on my face. "I'm sorry," he says. "About Lonnie. And everything else."

"You don't have to apologize," I say. "We can't help who we're related to." Another beat of silence passes, and we are getting dangerously close to my mom's car. "I'm sorry, too," I say. "That you've had to deal with that asshole your whole life."

"I don't think he's used to people standing up to him," he says, amusement in his voice. "I can't believe you did that Nancy. And that you're not running for the hills right now. I thought..."

"What?" I prompt.

"I thought he'd scare you away," Jonathan says sheepishly, turning his face away from me.

"Hey," I say, stopping to face him. We've made it to my car, but I'm reluctant to let him go. "We've fought monsters from another dimension, toppled a government agency, and exorcised your little brother together. I know what I'm signed up for. You're gonna need a lot more than some drunk jerk to get rid of me, Jonathan."

"I just..." he starts, biting his lip and staring down at his shoes. "You have enough going on without having to deal with all of this. I'd understand if you needed a little space."

A heartbreaking swell of rejection washes over me before I realize what he's actually doing. He's not pushing me away, he's giving me an out. And from the look on his face, it's killing him to do it.

Before I realize what I'm doing, I grab his face and pull him down to me, capturing his stunned lips in mine. At first, he's shocked into complete stillness, but after a moment he responds enthusiastically, grabbing my hips then my waist before sliding his hands up to cup my face and going back down again, like he can't decide where he wants to touch me. He kisses me with the same desperation he kissed me with when we were at Murray's, like this might be the last time

he ever touches me and he's trying to make the most of it. I open my mouth for him to explore, and he jumps at the chance. Suddenly, I'm pressed up against my mom's Volkswagen with Jonathan's tongue down my throat and his fingers grazing the skin of my waist under my sweater and I'm not entirely sure how I got here. I tangle my hands into his hair and crush his face closer to mine.

At some point, we have to stop and catch our breath, but his face stay close to mine. His eyes are closed, his breath coming in pants against my face. I run my hand down his cheek, letting my thumb wander to brush against his swollen lips.

"I think I've had enough space, if that's alright with you," I say softly, bringing his forehead down to mine. He curls his fingers tighter into my waist and kisses me again, this time soft and sweet, savoring. It feels astoundingly like a promise.

Someday soon we'll have to say it all out loud, say how we feel and what we want, but for now, this is enough.